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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IT](#) [ITALY](#) [NATIONAL](#) [ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: ITALY: PRODI WINS CLEAR VICTORY IN CENTER-LEFT
PRIMARIES

REF: A. ROME 3376

[1](#)B. ROME 3442

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor David Pearce
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Former EU Commissioner Romano Prodi confirmed his role as Center-Left party leader in a decisive victory in Italy's first ever coalition primaries on October 16. A surprisingly high 4.4 million voters gave Prodi 74.6 percent of the vote, versus 14.6 percent for his nearest rival, far-left Communist Renewal (RC) General Secretary Fausto Bertinotti. The unexpectedly wide margin of victory confirms Prodi as coalition leader and gives him a stronger hand against Bertinotti on the far left. Even so, the already fractioned Center-Left coalition is showing signs of further strain in the face of electoral reform legislation that is expected to weaken coalitions and strengthen party leaders, not least Prime Minister Berlusconi. END SUMMARY

PRODI WINS DECISIVE VICTORY, HIGH TURNOUT

[1](#)2. (SBU) Former EU Commission President Romano Prodi won the Center-Left election primaries held October 16 by a surprisingly decisive margin (REF A). Prodi won 74.4 percent of the votes, and far-left Communist Renewal (RC) candidate Fausto Bertinotti received 14.6 percent. Union of Democrats for Europe (UDEUR) Clemente Mastella took 4.5 percent and former anti-corruption prosecutor and head of the Italy of Values Party Antonio Di Pietro won 3.3 percent. In another surprise, nearly 4.4 million voters turned out for Italy's first-ever nationwide primaries. Election organizers had officially predicted one million participants, and party leaders privately had expressed confidence that turnout would reach two million.

[1](#)3. (C) Prior to election day, analysts had said that Prodi needed to win at least 60 percent of the vote and Bertinotti less than 20 percent for Prodi to assume the undisputed leadership of the Center-Left "Union" coalition. Press commentators and Center-Left party leaders have confirmed publicly that Prodi's decisive victory and the large turnout for the Center-Left mean Prodi is the coalition leader heading into spring 2006 national elections. Center-Right politicians, including PM Silvio Berlusconi, have tried to minimize the importance of the primary vote. Marco Casella, head of a Forza Italia-affiliated think tank, confirmed to Poloff that the primaries were a great success for the Center-Left generally, and Prodi specifically. He commented further that Berlusconi has been unwise to "ridicule" a process that involved nearly four million Italian voters, especially since some members of Berlusconi's coalition also had called for primaries by the Center-Right to determine coalition leadership.

VICTORY DOES NOT TRANSLATE INTO CLEAR PLATFORM

[1](#)4. (C) Center-Left politicians and representatives from independent think tanks told Poloff prior to the primary elections that Prodi, even as the confirmed leader of the Center-Right, would still have difficulty negotiating a coalition platform. Daisy party Head of International Affairs Luca Bader told Poloff that the winner in the primaries would not assume absolute coalition leadership in the way that the winner of a U.S. party primary would. Casella told Poloff that the process of negotiating a coalition platform will be complicated further as a result of electoral reform legislation that weakens the ties that bind coalitions together and strengthens party leaders (REF B). (COMMENT: The new law will effectively put less of a premium on pre-electoral coalition bargaining and more weight on post-election discussions, removing some of the leverage previously enjoyed by smaller coalition parties. END COMMENT.)

COALITION SPLITS ALREADY EMERGING

15. (U) The Center-Left "Union" previewed potential internal problems the same day it achieved an important victory. Electoral reform legislation that will almost certainly be law by next year's elections essentially obligates Prodi to either become a member of a particular political party or to found his own party. On the evening of his victory, Prodi declared that the tradition of the Olive Party (his previous election vehicle) is alive and well, and called for the

merger of the Center-Left's two largest parties, the Democrats of the Left (DS) and the Daisy Party, to form a new Olive Party. The press reports that DS President Massimo D'Alema responded somewhat positively, but that Daisy General Secretary Francesco Rutelli made it clear that the Daisy

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party would remain independent. At the same time, Italian Social Democrat (SDI) leader Enrico Boselli said his party would go ahead with a proposed alliance with the non-Union affiliated Radical Party. Mastella announced he would break ranks with the Union position on the electoral reform law and vote in favor of it when it arrives in the Senate. He also said the UDEUR might withdraw from the Union after a special party session in January.

COMMENT

16. (C) COMMENT: Prodi's strong victory and the surprisingly large primary turnout confirm Prodi's position as coalition leader. However, the divisions in the Center-Left and the soon-to-be passed electoral reform law have cast doubt over the importance of pre-electoral coalitions. Casella told Poloff the real victor is the DS, since it is the party that produced most of the Center-Left's four million primary voters. With the Daisy and other center-oriented parties seeing the possibility of a new "center-center" coalition emerging over the horizon, Prodi may find it increasingly difficult to hold his coalition. Bottom line: Prodi is stronger vis-a-vis the far left, but this is tempered by more disarray in the Center-Left coalition; Berlusconi and other big party leaders strengthened by the new electoral law; and a tightening race for national elections next spring. END COMMENT.
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